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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ABU DHABI 000393

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SUBJECT: UAEG ASKED TO ASSIST IRAQI REFUGEES

REF: STATE 30028

Classified by Charge d'Affaires Martin Quinn, reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (C) Summary: Senior Coordinator for Iraqi Refugee Issues Ambassador James Foley met in Abu Dhabi March 26 with MFA Assistant Under Secretary for Political Affairs Tariq al-Haidan and Secretary General of the UAE Red Crescent Society Dr. Saleh al-Taei to press the case for more robust support to Iraqi refugees in the region, with an emphasis on outstanding international appeals from the UN, World Food Program (WFP), and International Committee for the Red Cross (ICRC). Both UAE interlocutors emphasized their willingness to assist while putting the primary responsibility for assisting Iraqis on the Iraqi government in Baghdad. End summary.

MFA stresses GoI responsibility

12. (C) The MFA's senior career diplomat, Assistant Under Secretary for Political Affairs Ambassador Tariq al-Haidan,

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wasted no time in framing a conversation on Iraqi refugees in terms of GoI misuse of power when it should be assisting its own people. Iraq's suffering under Saddam had further deteriorated into sectarian strife, he lamented, and a lack of a broad-based GoI is the root cause of the Iraqi refugee crisis. In contrast to 40,000 Iraqis in the UAE (economic migrants relatively educated and comfortable), refugees generated by militia activity in Iraq are political casualties. Citing excessive Iranian influence, al-Haidan said GoI officials talk a good talk but are only reliable up to a point -- beyond which Iran's influence takes precedence.

13. (C) Ambassador Foley focused on the key obligations of the international community in the context of refugees: 1) restoring peace to Iraq to improve conditions for their return, 2) resettling those who likely cannot return, and 3) meeting the needs of over 2 million Iraqi refugees in the region. While the number of refugees may be stable, he noted, the cost of their upkeep is increasing. UNHCR feeds 150 thousand Iraqis in Syria and seeks resources to double that number. He emphasized the urgency of funding international appeals from the UN, WFP, and ICRC, citing the dangers of forcing Iraqis back home prematurely and also the risk of al-Qaeda exploitation if a generation of refugees grows up without education. It is in the interest of Arab nations, he continued, to counter Iran's influence by building stronger ties with the GOI.

14. (C) Al-Haidan said the UAE "completely supports" the U.S. position on assisting Iraqis, although the enormous demand calls for significant funding and the crisis is, at its core, a GoI responsibility. Returning to his discourse on a dysfunctional GoI, al-Haidan lamented that even Shia leaders like al-Sistani were silent at a time when their voice was needed most to quell sectarian tension. The UAE was willing to support PM al-Maliki, he said, if he could control the militia; unfortunately, the militia are "in the hands of al-Hakim" and al-Maliki relies on al-Hakim for support. The UAE seeks a unified Iraq, not sectarian division. Political progress is too slow in Baghdad, he reiterated, questioning what role a UAE Ambassador might play in Iraq in the current environment. ("I can call Iraqi officials" from Abu Dhabi easier than an Ambassador could access the GoI in Baghdad, he suggested.)

15. (C) "We will help the Iraqi refugees," concluded al-Haidan, but the UAEG hopes Iraq will also fulfill its responsibilities. A meaningful solution relies on the GoI. Ambassador Foley assured that the U.S. would continue to press the GoI to meet its responsibility to Iraqi refugees but reiterated the role of the international community and called again for a robust response to current appeals for assistance. He mentioned "matching pledges" as a possible incentive for the GoI to take a first step in conjunction with the international community.

Red Crescent gives much but willing to consider more

16. (SBU) Secretary General Dr. Saleh al-Taei of the UAE Red Crescent Society recounted for Ambassador Foley the UAE's active contributions to Iraq "before, during, and after the

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war." Clean water supplies, medical clinics, and a large hospital were among direct contributions in Iraq, valued at over USD 41 million (according to a printed tally shared at the meeting). The Society has donated similar facilities for Iraqi refugees in Jordan and Syria. Ambassador Foley commended the UAE effort, and the UAEG's donation of \$10 million to the UN to assist Iraqi refugees in Syria, yet emphasized the urgency of stepping up donations in light of what some estimate to be a USD 900 million requirement this year alone. He cited specific appeals from the UN, WFP, and ICRC. At stake is survival of an at-risk population; consequences of the failure to meet basic needs include increased prostitution, child labor, trafficking-in-persons, and an under-educated generation vulnerable to extremist persuasion. Desperation breeds despair.

17. (SBU) Ambassador Foley cited large U.S. contributions to displaced Iraqis and characterized the need as growing each year even if the number of refugees remains steady (as the displaced deplete their financial reserves). Al-Taei stated the UAE leadership's desire to assist those in need generally (having authorized donations in 130 countries) and acknowledged the desperate needs of Iraq. He recalled that Baghdad was once a "Paris" of sorts for Emiratis seeking a better education and the UAE was keen to assist. He noted over 300 cases of Iraqi children brought to the UAE for medical care, 40 planeloads of humanitarian supplies (including a recent flight to Mosul), the pre-war vaccination of 250 thousand Iraqi children in cooperation with UNICEF, and annual food donations during Ramadan.

18. (SBU) Without making a particular commitment, al-Taei thanked Ambassador Foley for his visit and said the UAE would continue to assist where it could. The UAE Red Crescent would like to partner with the American Red Cross, he added, in delivering humanitarian relief in Iraq. He said the U.S. is often seen as a military force without compassion -- closer cooperation between his organization and its American counterpart could put U.S. humanitarian efforts into the

public eye. "Our name is known in Iraq" and the Society's experience could improve the American image through joint projects. He said the UAE donation to the U.S. in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina (USD 100 million) was not because the U.S. needed the funds but to show that we are all in the "same boat."

¶9. (SBU) Al-Tae said assistance to Iraq (and Gaza) was discussed at a meeting of 21 Arab charitable organizations in Tunis, from which he had just returned. Much of the Iraq discussion had focused on the GoI's responsibility to use Iraq's national (oil) wealth to assist Iraqis. He felt the paltry sum of USD 25 million from the GoI to assist 2 million refugees showed little leadership of the issue. He also concluded that Syria's reference to Iraqis as "guests" rather than refugees made humanitarian appeals less forceful than in Jordan where definitions and records are somewhat more straightforward.

Will the UAE give more?

¶10. (C) Comment: The UAE is genuinely predisposed to assist needy populations in the region, as it has shown in Iraq, Lebanon, Afghanistan, and the Palestinian Territories. That said, the UAEG prefers projects to simple cash donations, and views the GoI with particular skepticism. As we reinforce Ambassador Foley's message of support for UNHCR and other international appeals in future meetings, it will be important for the senior royals in the UAEG to hear directly from USG interlocutors where aid to Iraqi refugees fits on our priority scale. End summary.

¶11. (U) This message was cleared by Ambassador Foley.
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